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Mr. Downey's Fate

For nearly two decades the American people have been led to believe that the Red Chinese had imprisoned two American men without just cause. The people of Connecticut continue to maintain a special interest in the case because one of the men, John T. Downey is a native of New Britain and a 1951 graduate of Yale University.

During the past week the Chinese released Richard Fecteau who, along with Mr. Downey, had been convicted by the Supreme People's Court in Peking of espionage. The Chinese claimed Mr. Downey and Mr. Fecteau were involved with the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assigned to drop agents and supplies into China to foment a revolution.

Mr. Downey and Mr. Fecteau fell into the hands of the Chinese after a plane in which they were passengers became disabled and was grounded inside Red China.

The United States government claimed Mr. Downey and Mr. Fecteau were civilian employees of the Army who had become lost on a routine flight from Korea to Japan. The United States called the sentencing of Mr. Fecteau to 20 years in prison and the commitment of Mr. Downey to life in prison a "most flagrant violation of justice" insisting the charges had been "trumped-up."

The United States assumed and held a hard line. In fact, in 1957 there were reports China would release the two prisoners if the United States would allow American newsmen to visit mainland China. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles would have no part of such negotiations. He was willing to sacrifice the lives of two young men, whether they be innocent of the charges or patriotic Americans risking their all for their country.

Classmates of Mr. Downey have since reported that representatives of the CIA visited Yale to recruit members and talked to Mr. Downey among others.

With the release of Mr. Fecteau, spokesmen for the State Department have modified the American position, saying "it would serve no useful purpose at this time" to discuss the activities of Mr. Fecteau and Mr. Downey when they were captured.

The circumstances in the world are far different today than they were back in the 1950s when countless Americans feared infiltration of our own government by Communists. Then and even now it is difficult to admit that we engage in activities which, if discovered, would be embarrassing.

If Mr. Downey was working for the CIA and a confession coupled with an apology would bring about his release, the United States government owes this man nothing less.